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PANDEMONIUM IN BRAZIL

Fear that covid-19 will plunge Brazil into an economic abyss has driven Jair Bolsonaro to an extremity of delirium. There is no parallel anywhere in South America, or perhaps even beyond it, for the conduct—political, economic, psychological—of our President. Aper and servitor of Donald Trump, he has taken the erratic performance of his idol to a peak that mixes morbidity and desperation, beckoning national tragedy.

The pandemic struck Brazil at a time when its economy was already in its deepest hole since the foundation of the Republic in 1889. The country's GDP growth had been hovering around zero for the past five years, with 11.6 million unemployed—11 per cent of the workforce. Industry, which had been contracting for the past fifteen years, comprised less than a quarter of GDP. Public expenditure on the health-care budget had been cut by 16 per cent under the Temer government which followed Dilma Roussef's PT administration, toppled in 2016 by a judicial-parliamentary intrigue. In no other Latin American country were the recipes of neoliberalism applied so recklessly in these last years, inflating a financial sector ever-more imbricated with international capital, while laying waste to productive infrastructure.

On this scorched earth Bolsonaro proceeded to sow dragon's teeth. The arrival of COVID-19 set off alarm bells for him: a recession, and ensuing loss of popularity, would be 'the end of my government', he said. At which point he sped up what was already a careening zigzag towards chaos, the kind of turbulence that would allow a coup d'état. In the first week of March he travelled to the United States with the sole aim of

manifesting his adulation of Trump, since there was nothing for the two to negotiate about. He used the trip to publicize upcoming demonstrations by his supporters against the Brazilian Congress and Supreme Court—despite the fact that his own Ministry of Health had warned against large gatherings. Regardless, on 15 March the planned marches went ahead, bellowing cries for a Bolsonaro dictatorship. In Brasília, where the crowd was sparse (and well-heeled), the President attended the demonstration in person, hugging fans and posing for selfies as he mingled with his flock.

In the following days, it was discovered that 25 of the people who had travelled in the presidential plane to Miami had contracted the new virus, including ministers, advisors and bodyguards with whom he had been shaking hands and conversing at close quarters. According to his son Eduardo, a former police clerk, now a deputy in the lower house of Congress, Bolsonaro took a test for infection on 13 March. His offspring told Fox News the result of the test was positive, but when the broadcaster aired the information, the younger Bolsonaro denied it, only for Fox to identify him as its source. The President took a second test, and publicly insisted he did not have COVID-19, but refused to release the result of the test, claiming it was a state secret. By now his credibility had sunk so far that doubts quickly spread throughout the country.

Next, Bolsonaro stepped up a bid to put an end to the social distancing decreed by assorted state governments, on the recommendations of the Ministry of Health and the WHO. Assembling his ministers, who were obliged to wear surgical masks—the President bizarrely placed his own over his eyes, like a blindfold—he forced them to sing his praises. Clashing with state governors, he traded barbs with the most powerful of them, a one-time ally in control of São Paulo, the largest state in the country. In Brasília, he criss-crossed the city, visiting a bakery and a pharmacy, greeting passers-by and exhorting them to go shopping and to reopen their trades.

This isn't a case, as with other Latin American rulers, of hesitation over the degree of social distancing required, or sceptical questioning of scientific data or even just following Trump. From Buenos Aires to Mexico City, there have been comparable failures to recover from the turbulence of 2008; lacking a stable insertion in today's world economy, Latin America as a whole was in stagnation when the pandemic arrived. Its

hospital systems, public and private, were delapidated, some all but sold for scrap. Responses to the virus were far from uniform. Argentina's new President Alberto Fernández acted quickly, mustering his predecessor Mauricio Macri and other conservative notables for a show of unity in his imposition of quarantines. In Chile, where demonstrations against its right-wing ruler Sebastián Piñera had been continuous since October, they were called off; the last, one of the largest in the country's history, took place on 8 March. Piñera promptly cancelled the referendum on convening a Constituent Assembly that he had reluctantly conceded, and sought to land the cost of lay-offs on workers' own social-security funds, though there he was thwarted by Congress. In Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador at first refused to order social distancing, and then delayed its implementation. Yet in the end, in one way or another, and at varying tempos, all these and other Latin American rulers realized that to cope with the virus it was necessary to buy time—which meant: to ensure that as many people as possible stay at home.

Not so Bolsonaro. Faced with a choice between keeping businesses going and saving lives, he has opted loudly and violently for business. After initially dismissing COVID-19 as 'just a sniffle', he would later issue the icy dictum: 'Some people are going to die. I'm sorry. That's life.' For it would only be 'oldsters' who succumbed. Brazil has 30 million people over the age of sixty: in a country with a Christian population, most Catholic but many Protestant, remarks like this are insults. Making up for them, he guaranteed that churches would remain open, allowing millionaire evangelicals to continue extorting tithes from the faithful. Issuing assurances that the virus can be cured by chloroquine, though the drug has no proven efficacy, he has offered not a jot of evidence to support his rejection of social distancing. At the presidential palace, his youngest son Carlos directs what has been widely dubbed a 'Cabinet of Hate', propagating lies and slanders. The President's appearances on television are vitriolic. Unlike most world leaders, Bolsonaro has no scientific committee advising him: medically speaking, everything he says about the pandemic is pure idiocy, inspiring only widespread fear and dismay.

Bolsonaro's option for confrontation has alienated congressmen, governors, mayors, media outlets and scientists, while heavy-weight economic forces like agribusiness which once supported him have crossed over into opposition. Eduardo, whom his father wished to make ambassador to Washington but the Senate would not confirm, took it upon himself as

de facto controller of the regime's foreign policy to align it with Trump's trade war against China, talking of COVID-19 as a 'Chinese virus' which Beijing had hidden from the world—prompting the Chinese ambassador in Brasília, Yang Wanming, to remark that the President's son had contracted a 'virus of the mind' and demand an apology; to which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs replied that not Eduardo but Yang should apologize. The incident led Band TV, a network traditionally linked to agribusiness, to brand Eduardo as 'irresponsible' and the Minister of Foreign Affairs as 'an idiot'. A week later Jair Bolsonaro himself telephoned Xi Jinping, announcing afterwards that 'all is well'. There was no comment from Beijing. Yet the People's Republic is Brazil's biggest trading partner, having displaced the United States from this role ten years ago. Commodity exports are vital to the national economy. Not only this: state governments and the Ministry of Health had been in talks with China to secure ventilators, N95 masks and test kits from it. Conversations with Brasília were frozen, but the People's Republic agreed to help hospitals in the northeast region, where various states have PT governors.

Bolsonaro has isolated himself politically. The presidents of the Chamber of Deputies and of the Senate, the Supreme Court, the governors alike of large and of small states, the big media combines, the scientific community, the Catholic church and the trade unions are in open opposition to him, each acting as they see fit. Amid this cacophony, Brazil is witnessing a *sui generis* instance of dual power: the President preaches in favour of a total return to work, while the states reinforce their quarantines. Without expecting Bolsonaro to resign, a large part of the country has renounced his authority and entered into effective civil disobedience. But with no federal coordination of the opposition, there are shortages of basic items everywhere, from medical equipment to the means of daily subsistence.

The President's base of support is small and shrinking—but it does exist. At his side are the evangelical churches, the big retail chains, factories that want to clear their overflowing stocks. The sonorous voices of big capital, banks to the fore, express disapproval of his *modus operandi* and the chaos it has unleashed, but they are not calling for his departure. The same is true of the leadership of the Armed Forces, whose commanders have mostly kept quiet. The Vice President, however, a reserve general, has begun giving interviews designed to project his image as a serious, trustworthy man of state.

The President's words do find an echo among small producers and businesspeople, those who live from day to day on the proceeds of their sales. Again, this is due to the choices that the Bolsonaro government has made. The Minister of the Economy, Paulo Guedes, a disciple of the Chicago School and an admirer of Pinochet, wants workers, the vast reserve army of labour, those without fixed occupations, stall-holders and others, to shoulder the cost of the crisis. After supplying credit to big companies like airlines, his next move was to send Congress a bill allowing employers not to pay wages for four months, without compensating workers in any way. The outcry was so great that he had to tell the public that this had been the result of a 'clerical error' in the transmission of the bill, and that workers would in fact have the right to a monthly payment of R$200 (some $40). In a single session, Congress readjusted this to R$600. The larger problem remains. An ideologue accustomed to decades of haranguing entrepreneurs and executives on the need to dismantle state intervention of any kind, lacking elementary practical knowledge of the world, Guedes has no idea of how to ensure that this bonus payment, or any other, reaches the under-employed, the unemployed, the favelas and the peripheries of the big cities.

It is within that universe that the COVID-19 crisis risks tragedy. The latest demographic census shows that Brazil has 6,329 favelas, across 323 cities. Almost 10 per cent of the population live in such 'subnormal agglomerations'. More than 70 per cent of their inhabitants do not have enough savings to survive for more than a week—which is why there has been looting of supermarkets in São Paulo. More than 11 million Brazilians live in overcrowded housing, with four or more people to a room, and 31 million do not have access to running water. Examples of the upshot in Rio de Janeiro include the City of God and Maré, where Marielle Franco lived. They are utterly exposed to the explosion of the virus. The authorities scarcely trouble themselves with care for their population. In some of these communities, like Rocinha in the South Zone of Rio, drug gangs have imposed curfews themselves. In others, NGOs try to organize information networks and provide basic services.

Political life is turning against the President. Every night at half past eight there are *panelaços* in various cities: thousands of people coming to their windows to clash pots and pans, shouting 'Out with Bolsonaro'. There have been shows of support for him, too: *carreatas*, in which convoys of cars drive through cities honking their horns and applauding the President, to be met with shouting from the windows. There is, however,

no comparison between the two: *panelaços* are much the stronger and more eloquent.

Popular political participation is limited, perforce, by the necessities of social distancing, which in separating people inevitably curtail the chances of collective action. So in good measure the course of this crisis lies in the hands of Brazilian elites—economic, parliamentary, scientific, judicial or media. Given the historical record of these rainmakers in Brazil, any decent citizen could weep. Seeking too to profit from the crisis are a swarm of pests: impenitent demagogues, canny middlemen, shameless crooks. But the force of events is tending to engulf them. For with the pandemic, what is materializing in Brazil is visibly now a pandemonium, in the Miltonic sense. Elites and public alike have to contend with a President embodying it. Ignorant, impulsive and uncontrollable, Bolsonaro has thrown in his lot with chaos. Recently, the presenter on a supportive TV station asked him if he was prepared to stage a coup d'état. Bolsonaro replied: 'Someone who wants to mount a coup never talks about it.'

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Translated by Max Stein